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Around the Western Cape in 60 Hours!

BY: Neal McKenna, November 2, 2009

Being a paid guest can be a slippery slope and this is the dilemma facing reviewers every time they agree to do an evaluation junket. First of all, good etiquette dictates one should be grateful for being gifted a free and action-packed trip in a fun spot like Cape Town. However, you must also remember not to be so appreciative that you don't plainly tell the truth, so here is the whole truth and nothing but the truth – the good, the dicey and the exhausting.

Interlink Airlines - a budget priced alternative

Over the last weekend in October, I and several other journos, as well as a gaggle of PR types, were invited by Queensgate Hotels & Leisure to experience some of their Cape Town properties. This adventure was held in conjunction with **Interlink Airlines**' inauguration of regular flights to Cape Town and Durban from Pretoria's Wonderboom Airport.

Actually, Interlink is trying very hard to be the little airline that could. Although fares are generally rand-for-rand matched with the budget airlines, this company provides many of those "extras" normally associated with the "big brand," full service carriers. So, on board what was essentially a charter flight, for this junket, drinks and a surprisingly delicious dinner were quickly served. Cabin crew was friendly and efficient and the pilots took advantage of tail winds, landing us in the Mother City after only one hour and forty-five minutes in the air. And, during the return flight the following Sunday, the crew dispensed an impressive in-flight lunch. Passengers received fresh chicken salad sandwiches, cheese and crackers plus mini chocolate bars, brownies and drinks – all of which are reported to be included in the low-ball ticket price.

Of course for every plus, there has to be a minus. Seats in the economy section were extremely narrow with all the leg room of a 1959 Austin Mini. The one saving grace here was this particular flight was not overly crowded. The situation allowed personages of above average girth to jack up the armrest and sort of lounge a là Barbara Cartland across two seats. To be honest, it was heavenly! However, in a real life travel situation, it could be an excruciatingly cramped two hours. Up front in business class, the going was quite a bit better – wider seats for wider derrieres and far more leg room afforded greater comfort.

In short, Interlink is what it is – a budget priced alternative offering those little extras "no frills" passengers have learned to do without in order to save a buck. This coupled with the convenience of

operating out of a small national airport, makes this new airline an obvious choice. For the money, you won't do any better.

In Cape Town, **the Rockwell All-Suite Hotel** was our home away from home. Inspired by the early 20th century buildings of downtown Manhattan, the hotel has been designed with a distinct up-market industrial New York City ambience. One and two bedroom self-catering apartments are generously spacious and have views of Signal Hill, Table Mountain, Cape Town Harbour and Green Point. Located in the heart of De Waterkant, close to the historical Bo-Kaap and the V&A Waterfront, it is ideal accommodation for travelers of all types. Stylish retail stores, restaurants, coffee bars and nightspots are all within walking distance, making The Rockwell especially convenient and safe.

Rockwell All-Suite Hotel, Cape Town

On the flip side, service is not The Rockwell's strong suit. I am a bit of a Luddite, I admit it. I don't know how to set the alarm on my cell phone, so I asked the desk clerk to give me a wake-up call at 7:00 a.m. And since I am so very push-button challenged, I always have trouble operating hotel room air conditioners and the satellite TV remote. This time was no exception. I called the desk to ask someone to come up and show me how to get things working. In the meantime, I opened the sliding glass doors leading to the balcony and let the cool night air blow in from the harbour. – Ditto for the bedroom. After struggling with the remote controls for about an hour, I gave up and went to bed. As for the wake-up call and help with the TV – well, I'm still waiting! While I'm getting it all off my chest, the buffet breakfasts were not particularly inspired and the supply of food always ran out before the demand did. And there was never enough breakfast serving staff. Those who were on duty gave it a valiant try but they were simply out numbered. Okay, okay, I feel better now.

However, to be fair, people don't usually book into self-catering hotels to watch telly, eat hotel breakfasts or receive wake-up calls. If you plan to be a do-it-yourselfer, you shouldn't run into any problems. The hotel is stylish, bright, spacious, clean and conveniently located. These are all pretty good reasons for staying there.

Saturday, October 31st was a very busy day and it got off to an early start. Following breakfast, we were herded onto a tour bus. Heading west we got to cruise by the Western Cape's nuclear power plant, several mysteriously still power generating windmills as well as many other local oddities. All were pointed out and explained to us by our bus tour guide. Eventually, we stopped in an amazing little fishing village called Paternoster. This is a town famous for its one-and-a-half stores, its snow-white buildings, equally white sand beaches and azure waters.

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Our next port of call was the **Shelley Point Hotel, Spa & Country Club**. Just a little over an hour's drive up the west coast from Cape Town, it is a romantic and tranquil destination well worth the bumpy ride. Comprised of forty-two luxury suites and two garden villas, the hotel has the look of a grand colonial plantation house. A family destination, Shelley Point Hotel has activities for children of all ages – even the ones well past the age of majority. This is the place where you can play a round or two on the 9-hole golf course, relax in the clubhouse or treat yourself to an indulgent pamper at the spa.

Shelley Point Hotel, Spa & Country Club

Trust me, the spa's aroma therapy shower tubes with six massaging water jets and a huge overhead nozzle have to be experienced to be believed! The buffet lunch served to our group was also quite spectacular – featuring one of the best lamb curries I have ever tasted. And, before dessert, we were treated to a few magic tricks performed by the hotel manager. Obviously, his career prior to becoming an hotelier involved a top hat and a red-lined cape.

Keeping in the spirit of the day – Halloween – we were informed we would be having dinner in one of the Cape's most haunted places, the Alphen Country House Hotel. Built in 1714, it is an historic country manor and national monument. Suites here are furnished in a style recalling the venue's extravagant past, with period furniture standing comfortably alongside more modern amenities like en suite baths. For dining, the newly re-furbished Manor House Restaurant – also known as Cloete's Grillroom – offers à la carte dining in a room which has been in use for almost 300 hundred years. However, in the here and now, the Boer & Brit pub is the popular place where most of the hotel's corporeal activity is centered.

Still, after our excellent dinner, a few brave souls from our party opted to seek out things far less substantial than bottled spirits. We went upstairs to visit the infamous "room 2" the hotel's reputedly most haunted room. The story goes that the spooks won't allow people of English descent to have any rest if they try to bunk in here. Also on display, on the first landing of the stairway, is the antique rocking horse which regularly rocks under the power of unseen hands and it had been up to its old tricks just a few days earlier. Alas, on this particular night, the spirits were off somewhere else, perhaps at a fancy dress Halloween party. However, waiters and hotel staff are prepared to swear on a stack of Bibles that they are really not alone in the old house.

In all, the trip to Cape Town as the guest of Queensgate Hotels and Interlink Airlines was quite a positive experience. Yes, there were glitches along the way but they were minor. And, have you ever been on a trip that was totally glitch-free? Me neither. I would definitely fly Interlink on my own dime and – despite the somewhat spotty service – I would hire a suite at the Rockwell, so look into the Queensgate/Interlink package deals.